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Chapter 1

My studio practice is centred on an overall concern with our relationship to history: cultural debris, the re-appropriation of tradition, and nostalgia. The purpose of this essay is to examine the nostalgic tendency prevalent in much of contemporary artistic production, as well as critically consider my studio practice in relation to this tendency. The contemporary nostalgic tendency is of course not only limited to artistic production; on the contrary, this production reflects a larger cultural undercurrent. The nostalgia that interests me here is not merely an individual sickness (mine, others, etc.) but a collective symptom, an historical emotion.

In order to better clarify this nostalgic impulse in contemporary practice, I will situate this investigation within the discourse of the shift from the macro-category of the postmodern to the concept of the contemporary. It is widely agreed that the critical discourse of postmodernism (and its related cognates "postmodernity" and "the postmodern") has run its course as a useful critical term for accurately assessing the contemporary global situation. The analyses of Terry Smith on primary tendencies in the current condition of contemporaneity in art ([^] footnote? "in the aftermath of modernity, and the passing of the postmodern" [(Smith, 2008, 1)] will be used as starting point for my examination of nostalgia.

In an article published in 2006 Smith identifies two wider tendencies within contemporary art, which he also develops in later writings. (see Smith 2011 and 2012). Given the generally accepted passage from the 'modern' and 'postmodern' to the 'contemporary', in this article Smith attempts to examine the concept of the contemporary and the value of a macro-description of contemporary art. In his analysis Smith considers contemporaneity as a current critical and cultural term that goes beyond the mere sense of being temporally simultaneous. Even as descriptor of current concomitant events, Smith admits that "recently, in most ordinary usage—in English and in some but not all other European languages—[the term *modern*] has surrendered currency to the term *contemporary* and its cognates. (Smith, 2006, 700-701)

Smith argues that artists today have embraced and engaged with the contemporary world's teeming multiplicity – its proliferating differences, its challenging complexities – in ways in which the macro-descriptors of modernity and postmodernity fail to fully encompass.

Departing from the insight that "multiple temporalities are the rule these days, and their conceptions of historical development move in multifarious directions" (Smith, 2006, 702), Smith goes on to sketch two main tendencies as exemplary forces in current artistic discourse within these multiple temporalities. These tendencies are presented as antinomies, in the sense that their internal logic and discourses are

seemingly incompatible with each other, yet they can be considered together in a wider global context. Smith advances these two descriptive characterisations then as "polarities of a dichotomous exchange, the central regions of which are occupied by a mainstream that is, paradoxically, dispersive: the spilling diversity of contemporary practice."

The tendency that interests me for the purposes of this essay is what Smith considers as a continuation and revival of the Modern.

"contemporary art, as a movement, has become the new modern or, what amounts to the same thing, the old modern in new clothes. (Smith, 2006, 688)

In an updated text of his article published in the edited book *Antinomies of Art and Culture* (2008), Smith writes of this tendency:

"One mainstream returns to modernity, to revised visions of its richness in the West, of its multiplicity and distinctiveness elsewhere, and of the tensions across its many borders. The presumption here is that this revisioned modernity will return to take up a paradigmatic role, hopefully one less conflicted and deadly than that which reached its apogee in the twentieth century."

This tendency marks for Smith "the institutionalization of Contemporary Art as a recursive refinement of high Modernism." (Smith, 2008, 16) He identifies the late critic and curator Kirk Varnedoe as aptly illustrating this tendency. On the occasion of millennial exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York during 2000, Varnedoe writes:

"There is an argument to be made that the revolutions that originally produced modern art, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have not been concluded or superseded—and thus that contemporary art today can be understood as the ongoing extension and revision of those founding innovations and debates. ... Contemporary art is collected and presented at this Museum as part of modern art—as belonging within, responding to, and expanding upon the framework of initiatives and challenges established by the earlier history of progressive art since the dawn of the twentieth century."
(Varnedoe, 2001, 12.)

The second large tendency according to Smith consists of a more engaged artistic strategy in relation the contemporary world, the political and economical process of globalisation, and the discourse of globalism and cosmopolitan citizenship. This conception of contemporary art lies at the intersection between culture and globalisation, which "marks the limits out of which the postcolonial, post-cold war, post-ideological, transnational, deterritorialized, diasporic, global world has been written." (Smith, 2008, 6) It is important to note in passing that by his own admission, Smith's discourse in revolves around "major world art distribution centers", and in particular the art exemplified in major international events such as Biennales, including events such as Manifesta and Documenta. For instance, he uses

the 2002 edition of Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor, as an exemplar of this second tendency. Smith's characterisations thus are prey to the changing institutional stances toward the global contemporary world, where Enwezor's directorship of Venice Biennale in 2015 may fall short of embodying Smith's own description of this tendency.

David Geert's nostalgic neo-formalism

David Geers (2012) points to a recent revival of modernist tropes in artistic practice that are germane to the larger tendency of a nostalgic (re)enactment and continuation of modernism:

"a slow gravitational pull, in both production and reception, toward a less reflexive and more nostalgic attitude. (Geers, 9)

"My conjecture is that this revival is a return to foundations not unlike similar returns during periods of great anxiety and upheaval." (Geers, 10) (cf. Boym on the rise of nostalgia during times of upheaval)

According to Geers, this resurrection of formalist concerns to the obliteration of criticality "represents a nostalgic retrenchment on the part of an art world threatened by technological transformation and economic uncertainty that now undermine its hierarchies and claims of cultural precedence." The space itself for the discourse of art seems challenged.

Geers terms this general tendency under the label "neo-formalism", highlighting the formal aspects of current practice's engagement with modernist works. That is, the neo-formalist tendency is preoccupied with the visual or rather "formal" surface of modernism, and generally eschews any real engagement with the discourse and theories that underline the original modernist formalisms.

Geers also highlights that this tendency puts "emphasis on performative production (read process) and abstract form". In the absence of any critical discourse behind these practices, "process", "materiality", and "the simplicities of artistic labor" become the rhetorical keywords in which they are contextualized for the larger public.

Such "resurrected interest in material experimentation and anti-pictorial opacity" acts as a resistance to the "perfected illusionism" latent in digital media and a hypermediated relation with the world. Yet it is also a conservative tendency. It aims to conserve and preserve that relevancy of (traditional) artistic discourse that positions the work of art as an autonomous object:

"Today's neo-formalism nevertheless pursues an art of intuitive, aesthetic arrangement that satisfies the need for formal continuities and simple answers during a particularly complex time." (Geers, 10)

This tendency of a return to modernism and formal concerns is patent not only in the works produced by artists themselves, but also in the viewing public, curators and collectors. As Geers puts it, the neo-formalist (nostalgic) work "greet[s] a pre-primed spectator, already indoctrinated into the codes and mythologies of the modern, who happily welcomes it as a return to old certainties – an echo of a lost golden age." (Geers, 14)

Geer's characterisation of neo-formalism has been refashioned in contemporary art criticism in the label "Zombie Formalism", coined in 2014 by artist-critic Walter Robinson. Robinson's coinage is a succinct distillation of the overall tendency to re-enact modernist tropes in contemporary culture. On his choice of terms Robinson writes:

"'Formalism' because this art involves a straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting (yes, I admit it, I'm hung up on painting), and 'Zombie' because it brings back to life the discarded aesthetics of Clement Greenberg, the man who championed Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella's "black paintings," among other things." (Robinson, 2014)

Jerry Saltz humorously expands on the ubiquity of this tendency within the establish art institution, a tendency particularly successful in term of market sales, and widely appealing to speculator-collectors.

"The ersatz art in which they [high-yield risk-averse buyers and dealers] deal fundamentally looks the way other art looks. It's colloquially been called Modest Abstraction, Neo-Modernism, M.F.A. Abstraction, and Crapstraction. (The gendered variants are Chickstraction and Dickstraction.)" (Saltz, 2014)

In this context, consider Smith admonition against such prevalent neo-modern tendencies in what he calls "official Contemporary Art":

"If it is to be truly contemporary, rather than an update of comfortable Modernism, the art of today must respond deeply to the complex conditions of contemporaneity." (Smith, 2008, 16)

Shift from postmodern irony to contemporary nostalgia

It is important to notice that the passing fad in art criticism of such buzzwords as "Zombie Formalism" is only a small example of the larger tendency of a (continuation and (re)enactment of modernism in contemporary art, as described by Terry Smith.

Within this larger tendency, and beyond the niche of neo-modern formal abstraction, it is possible to note the shift from postmodern ironic quotation (where we can situate the critical project of artists associated with the Pictures Generation), to the rather genuine use of citation and invocation of ruins and the modernist past.

"Appropriation then is about performing the unresolved by staging object, images or allegories that invoke the ghosts of unclosed histories in a way that allows them to appear as ghosts and reveal the nature of the ambiguous presence."
(Verwoert, 2007).

Svetlana Boym remarks that at the "early 21st century exhibits a strange ruinophilia, a fascination for ruins that goes beyond postmodern quotation marks."

Already during the 1990s cultural criticism tended to acknowledge the prevalence of a nostalgic impulse in contemporary cultural production. This resurgence of nostalgia was usually conceptualised as an interrelated occurrence with the demise of post-modern irony as a central artistic and literary strategy. (See Hutcheon and Huyssen).

Within this shift from postmodern irony to contemporary nostalgia, it is relevant to mention the analyses of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker on what they term meta-modernism (Vermeulen & v.d.Akker, 2010). The sweeping generalisation implied in their use of the term meta-modern as a cultural and historical style of the contemporary period means that their descriptive project is necessarily sketchy and incomplete. Nevertheless, Vermeulen and van den Akker are correct in the description of a widespread move beyond the postmodern "years of plenty". In their analyses, contemporary Western culture is characterised by a oscillating motion between both modern aspirations and postmodern self-referentiality and irony.

In the context of a nostalgic reprisal of modernism, the meta-modern signifies a patent shift from postmodern criticality to genuine modernist gesturing. In this shift, reflective nostalgia plays an important role, in which the pendulum of both modernist and postmodernist strategies belies an impulse to dream "potential futures rather than imaginary pasts."

Sketch towards Chapter 2:

Introduce Svetlana Boym on Nostalgia

Within the contemporary Terry Smith locates an wide inability to think the future, which is interrelated with an obsession with the reinterpreting and scavenging the past.

"While belief in the persistence through the present of ongoing formations is widespread, the forms in which that might occur seem less predictable. Obsession with the past, and concern about the complexities of the present, have tended to

thicken our awareness of it, at the expense of expectations about the future." (Smith, 2008, 9)

This infatuation with the past interrelated with the uncertainty of fully and clearly thinking the future, reveals the undercurrent of a nostalgic impulse. In this context Svetlana Boym study on the concept and cultural occurrences of nostalgia provides a suitable critical background to consider the contemporary nostalgic impulse in art, as well as in my own practice. As Boym perceptibly acknowledges, "nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals."

"If at the beginning of the twentieth century modernists and avant-gardists defined themselves by disavowing nostalgia for the past, at the end of the twentieth century reflection on nostalgia might bring us to redefine critical modernity and its temporal ambivalence and cultural contradictions."

Boym considers nostalgia in an expanded sense, which has more purchase within the temporal than the geographical. In her conceptualisation, nostalgia is a symptom of a relation not to a particular land or geographical space, but rather a "yearning for a different time", that is, a peculiar relation to different temporalities, often imaginary.

"Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy." Historian George Lukacs called it a kind of "transcendental homesickness."

Brief exposition of the concept of nostalgia and Boym on 2 kinds of nostalgic impulse

The word nostalgia comes from two Greek roots (nostos = return home; algia = longing). The word was coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688. Hofer believed that it was possible "from the force of the sound Nostalgia to define the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one's native land." Among the first victims of the newly diagnosed disease were various displaced people of the seventeenth century, freedom-loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad.

With the advent of Romanticism, nostalgia passed from being a bodily symptom, to be treated and studied by scientific medicine, to a more abstract condition, a condition of the soul. Rather than being an object of medicine, nostalgia passed onto the realm of arts, literature and philosophy. But nevertheless it retains the quality of

being a kind of pathological state. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. Nevertheless, according to Boym, nostalgia is at the same time deeply imbedded in the discourse of modernity, and thus in its contemporary aftermath:

"Nostalgia is not "antimodern"; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another." (Boym, Svetlana. "Nostalgia and Its Discontents". *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2007))

"Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values."

[[loose excerpt :

[["Can contemporary nostalgia manifest along a variety of cultural areas, from cinema and high-street consumer goods.... be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute (lost during the modern period), for a home that is both physical and spiritual, for the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history..." Boym]]]

Reflective nostalgia:

"[F]ocus not on recovery, but on the meditation of history and the passage of time. Resist the pressure of external efficiency and take sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars."

A nostalgia "enamoured of distance, not the referent itself."

Contemporary nostalgia in a wider context (Retromania):

[Hal Foster: "Today the canon appears less a barricade to storm than a ruin to pick through." (Foster, 2002, 81)]

The nostalgic impulse (both of restorative and a reflective kinds) is patent not only in contemporary art. On the contrary, contemporary art seems to reflect a wider tendency within Western society in a variety of fields. Pop culture in particular has been conceptualised as rife with a sense of enamourment and nostalgia for its own past. In his book *Retromania*, Simon Reynolds argues that the past is "calcifying" contemporary music.

In a remark tellingly similar to Hal Foster's formulation, for Reynolds "history must have a dustbin, or history will be a dustbin, a gigantic, sprawling garbage heap", from which contemporary artists and audiences alike plunder their material.

"The deleted, the obscure, the exotic: archaeological layers of musical history are constantly being rediscovered, circulated and filtered into records being released today." (Reynolds, 2011)

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